United States Coast Guard
U.S. Department of Homeland Security

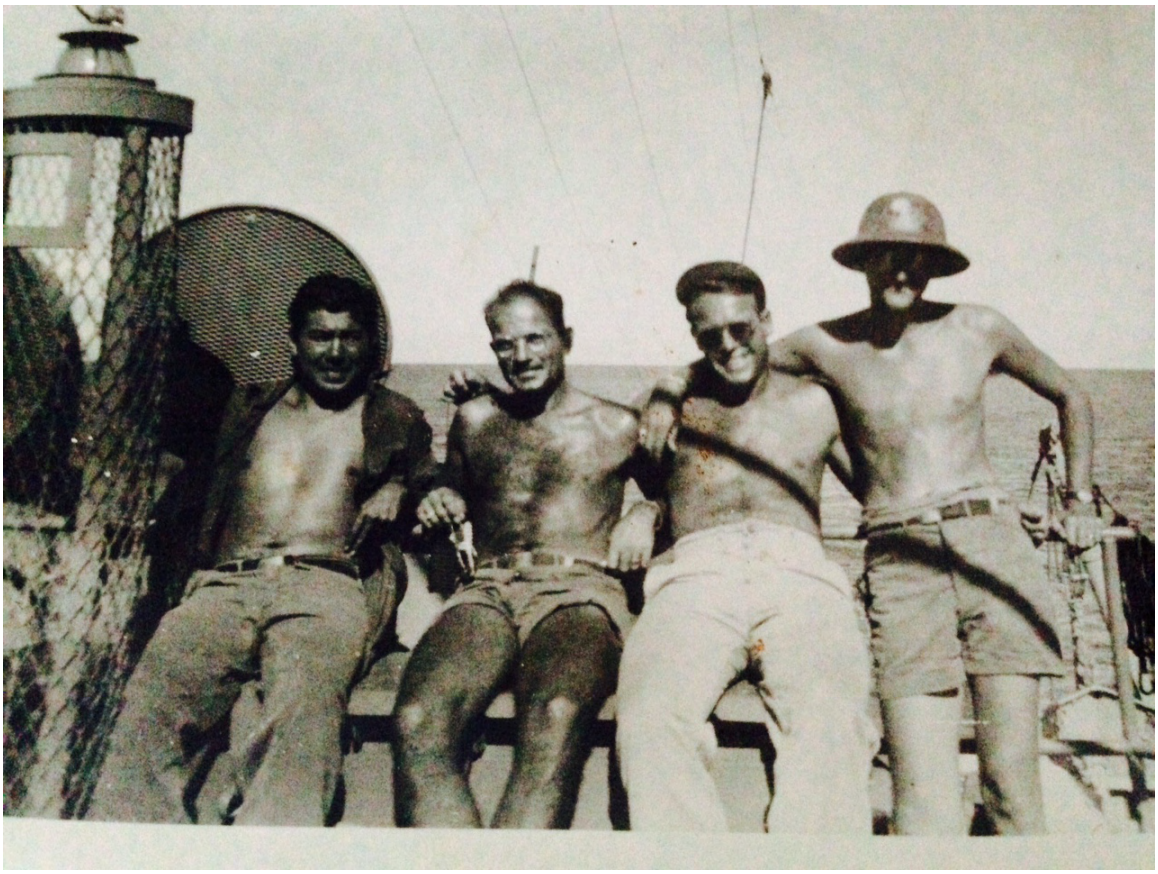
U.S. Coast Guard Oral History Program

Interview of: Radioman Third Class Ray Carl, USCGR

World War II Veteran & USS FS-173 Crewman

Conducted by: C. Douglas Kroll, Ph.D., U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary

Date of Interview: 17 January 2014
Location of Interview: Palm Springs, CA



RM3/c Ray Carl on far right, at sea, World War II.

Ray Carl, January, 2014

Biographical Summary

Born on January 12, 1925 in Long Beach, California, Ray Carl grew up in Long Beach, graduating from Woodrow Wilson High School in 1943. After being rejected by the U.S. Navy for medical reasons he enlisted in the U.S. Coast Guard and attended recruit training on Catalina Island. He then attended radiomen school in Wilmington and Point Vicente, California. While in radioman school he married Barbara Fisher in Long Beach. They had one child during the war and two children after the war. Upon completion of radiomen's school, he was assigned to a Coast Guard manned Freight Supply Ship, *FS-173*. The 177-foot *FS-173* was one of nearly 200 Coast Guard manned U.S. Army Transportation Corps vessels that operated primarily in the Pacific during World War II. He spent the rest of his time on the ship in the southwest Pacific, visiting New Guinea and the Philippines. His experiences were much like those portrayed in the famous 1955 Hollywood movie, "Mr. Roberts", starring Jack Lemmon and Henry Fonda.

After discharge he entered a career in furniture sales and retail furniture management from which he retired about 1998. His first marriage ended in divorce and he married Mardi Canaday on September 5, 1991. They have made their retirement home in Palm Springs since 1998. He has three children, five grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.

INTERVIEWER: Where and when were you born?

CARL: I was born in Long Beach, California in 1925.

INTERVIEWER: Would you tell be briefly about your childhood and how you came to join the Coast Guard?

CARL: I didn't want to be drafted, so as soon as I turned 18 I went to the Navy Recruiting Office in Los Angeles to volunteer for the U. S. Navy. During my physical exam the doctor watched me walk back and forth and noticed something of a gait. He measured my hipbone and ankle and said there was one-half inch difference between the two. He went on to tell me that because of that I would not be able to go into combat. I thought that was kind of funny. There was a small Coast Guard recruiting office in Long Beach, so I thought I would try there, but assumed I would be rejected for the same reason the Navy had rejected me. It was just the reverse. They took my right away.

INTERVIEWER: When did you enlist?

CARL: 1943

INTERVIEWER: Had you graduated from high school?

CARL: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Which high school?

CARL: Woodrow Wilson High School in Long Beach.

INTERVIEWER: Where did they send you for recruit training/boot camp?

CARL: I was trained on Catalina Island, at the isthmus. The merchant marines were trained in Avalon and the Coast Guard at the isthmus.

INTERVIEWER: About how many people went through boot camp with you?

CARL: I would be guessing, but I would say about 100. But the more I think about it I would say less than 100, maybe 50.

INTERVIEWER: Did they have temporary buildings for everybody to live in there at the isthmus?

CARL: They had Civil War barracks that we lived in. plus tents.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of things did you do at boot camp?

CARL: We had a cleared area, a grinder, where we had to march with rifles over our heads for training. We had a pier. We had lifejackets on and had to jump off the pier.

INTERVIEWER: Did you practice rowing boats?

CARL: No, but we did have a day or two practice on a yacht that I think belonged to a movie star who had donated it to the service for training purposes. We did a few things on this sailing yacht.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember how long boot camp lasted?

CARL: I would say 4-6 weeks.

INTERVIEWER: How was the food at boot camp?

CARL: The food was good. We had a big band orchestra that would come in and entertain us while we were eating.

INTERVIEWER: Looking back on your later service, do you think that boot camp prepared you well for your first duty station?

CARL: No. Not particularly well.

INTERVIEWER: After you graduated from boot camp, where did you go?

CARL: I was trained to be a radio operator. That was in Wilmington, California, right near Long Beach where I had lived. I trained there and after that I trained at Point Vicente, where we did our more advanced training.

INTERVIEWER: Did you pick radioman, or were you selected for it?

CARL: I think I selected it. It was offered to me and I took it.

INTERVIEWER: What did you do after radio school?

CARL: The top graduate went to air-sea-rescue, which was a pretty good deal. My grades weren't quite that high.

INTERVIEWER: About how long was training to become a radioman, total?

CARL: I would say three months. It was not continuous. We got some time off between the two schools. Since I lived nearby I had a chance to visit my home. I got married during that time.

INTERVIEWER: How were the facilities and food like at radio school?

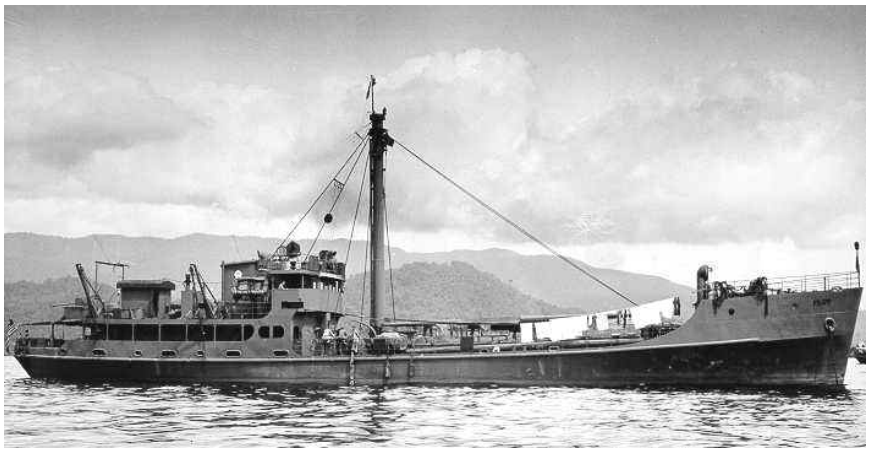
CARL: The food was quite good. I got to eat food I had never eaten before, and it was different.

INTERVIEWER: What did you do after you completed radio school?

CARL: From Point Vicente I went to my ship, the *FS-173.*

INTERVIEWER: Where did you meet your ship?

CARL: At Wilmington. It had been built in New Orleans and I think it was doing service for the Army because it was painted green. I was assigned to that ship and the first task I had was to help paint it gray. The ship came around from New Orleans, through the Panama Canal, to California. The first day I came aboard I observed a black fellow, who was assigned to the ship being chased by one of the petty officers. He had a weapon in his hand and was chasing this guy off the ship. Being from California, we didn't have this racism, so it surprised me.



USS *FS-177* (same class as *FS-173*)

INTERVIEWER: Did that fellow ever come back to the ship?

CARL: No. I think after that incident the officers decided it would not be a good idea to have him back aboard. We had three officers aboard. The skipper and the executive officer and third one, which was the lowest ranking of the three.

INTERVIEWER: Were there any other blacks in the crew?

CARL: No. We had southerners in the crew and they had different ways.

INTERVIEWER: Was the commanding officer when you reported LTJG Bain or LTJG Kelly?

CARL: Bain was the Executive Officer when I reported aboard. Irvin was the Skipper. Bain was a real nice guy. I was told by the officer below Bain or maybe by a chief petty officer, to go up the king post and remove the paint from the glass insulators for the antenna wires. I went up and had to lean over to get to the insulators. I was up there pretty high and things looked pretty small below and decided that I couldn't do this. I came down and told the first officer. He told me that I better go back up and do it or be prevented from going off shore. I somehow got in touch with Bain and told him the situation. He went up about half way and came down again, and told me I didn't have go back up and that he would talk to whoever assigned me that task. I told him that I was a radio operator and was not trained to scrape paint. Eventually I did scrape paint, and chip the deck.

INTERVIEWER: You got aboard the ship in Wilmington and repainted it. Where did you sail to next?

CARL: We headed to New Guinea, but our first stop was Hawaii.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have liberty in Hawaii? If so, how were you treated?

CARL: Yes. I remember it was very warm, but I don't remember how I was treated. I just walked around, because I was kind of a loner. We spent a week there and then we went to an island called Funafuti. It was a small atoll [in the Ellice Islands] that I've never found on a map. From there we went to the tip of New Guinea, to Milne Bay. It was not quite to Australia. From there we worked up and down the coast delivering cargo. Our major cargo was a Bailey bridge [a portable, pre-fabricated truss bridge]. Something you needed in an area where you had to cross a river and couldn't get across. We also delivered some mortar shells, a barrel of Coke, stuff like that. Sometimes we had Kotex. We had very limited food to eat on that ship.

INTERVIEWER: You were a supply ship, but no food for the crew?

CARL: Yes. Once and a while we would run into a naval ship and send our little boat over, so we could get some vegetables, which we had none of. We had a southern cook who could hardly speak English. We didn't have much to eat. It wasn't all his fault. He wasn't a bad cook, but he had nothing to work with. Vienna sausage was a real hot item. It was canned. There were plenty of weevils in our flour. We'd go down to the hold and see what was there worth eating. One of the early cargoes contained a barrel of Coke syrup, which the

crew quickly raided. The guys jury rigged a setup where they extracted CO2 from a fire extinguisher, for carbonation, and mixed it with the syrup.

Our first stop was Milne Bay. Another one of our early stops was at Guadalcanal. I remember the area was very deep water. Our skipper dropped the anchor as we [were] creeping up to the shore, trying to get a reading on the depth. He finally gave the command to let the anchor go. We never saw the anchor again! Just before we arrived there they had taken the anchor chain and connected it to the bulkhead with a heavy rope. The water was so deep when he gave the final command it just broke the rope and all the chain followed the anchor to the bottom!

INTERVIEWER: How many people were in the crew?

CARL: Twenty-five.

INTERVIEWER: How were the living quarters for the crew?

CARL: Pretty tight. The bunks were three-high. I never saw the officer quarters.

INTERVIEWER: What a typical day like for you, when you were sailing around or at a port?

CARL: At one port, it could have been Hollandia [Djajapura] or Finschafen, we would be water skiing. We would get a couple of boards strapped to our feet and be pulled by our little powerboat. We had a little fun. The water was beautiful, in some areas it was crystal clear.

INTERVIEWER: You were never involved in any invasions as a freight supply ship, but were always behind the lines, is that correct?

CARL: Yes. But we did come close once as we pulled into Tacloban in the Philippines, it was a huge harbor loaded with hundreds of ships. It was where [General Douglas] MacArthur made his famous “I have returned” speech. Not long after we had anchored we heard the warning signals of an attack, which was three shots of a 40mm cannon. Everyone scrambled to their battle stations. Our little ship was only 165-foot in length, as I remember, and a lot of Navy people thought we were carried by a larger ship. When the shots were fired we had to brow at the dock. I had been on Quartermaster watch on the bridge. Everybody scrambled to their station and captain of the ship scrambled up the ladder to the bridge, ran across the bridge and hit a little milk stool that he had been standing on to come ashore. He was a short guy and needed to see out the window. He fell and broke his wrist. He blamed me for leaving the stool in that place and he

really chewed me out for it. It turned out to be false alarm. A plane never came over to strafe the airstrip. It had happened before, but not on this day. Two or three months later our ship pulled into Finschafen, back in New Guinea. I was on the watch again and read the blinkers [flashing lights] and learned that a committee was coming aboard to award honor to our captain. The Coast Guard officers, in full dress uniform came aboard to have their ceremony. The crew was lined up on deck and they presented our captain with a Purple Heart. The captain broke his wrist and must have put in for a Purple Heart medal. I couldn't keep from laughing. The Coast Guard must have been short of heroes and embellished the broken wrist.

INTERVIEWER: Were there any large weapons aboard your ship?

CARL: Yes. We had one 40mm cannon at the stern, two .50 caliber machine guns on the bow and two .50 caliber machine guns mid-ship.

INTERVIEWER: Have you ever seen the movie "Mr. Roberts"?

CARL: Yes, I loved it.

INTERVIEWER: The movie is about a navy ship, USS *Reluctant*, but they used an FS to portray it.

CARL: It looked like my ship.

INTERVIEWER: In the movie and the book it is based on, it talks about this ship, and says that during the war it sailed "from apathy to tedium with occasional side trips to monotony and boredom." Would that be an accurate description for your FS?

CARL: That's perfect! Another movie that I liked a lot was "The Caine Mutiny." I loved that movie. The captain was similar to mine. It was a beautifully written movie with a good moral message.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have liberty in New Guinea or Philippines?

CARL: We did have a chance to get off the ship and look around before we returned to the ship. There wasn't that much there to see. There were natives and we would have a picture taken with them.

INTERVIEWER: In your time in some of the ports did you have any interaction with Navy or Army personnel?

CARL: The only connection we would have was to see if they had something to eat. We got a case of Baby Ruth's from someone, but they were full of worms. They were frozen so we just ate them.

At one port we had another incident that I remember. The officers went ashore, sometimes for illicit purposes. While they were ashore some the crew members were drinking on the ship, which was prohibited. They made some alcohol from the contents of one of the fire extinguishers and got drunk. They saw a plane at some distance away, far beyond the range of our guns and were shooting at it with the 40mm. I was scared to death. I tried to stay clear of them. The officers later came back to ship, but nothing was ever said or done.

INTERVIEWER: Were you still on *FS-173* when the war ended in the Pacific?

CARL: Yes. I was on it all through the war.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember where you were at when to get the news that Japan had surrendered?

CARL: I got the message that the war was over when we were in Mindanao, Philippines. We headed for Manila Harbor. I had more points than a lot of the crew who had served longer, but I was married and had a child. I was able to call home and tell my wife. I was placed on a kind of troop transport ship for return to the U.S.

INTERVIEWER: What port did that ship take you too in the U.S.?

CARL: To San Francisco, actually to Alameda, where I was discharged.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember the date?

CARL: It was November of 1945.

INTERVIEWER: While you were in the war, where was your wife and child living?

CARL: In Long Beach. Her family and my family both lived there.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember the day you were discharged from the Coast Guard? How you felt that day?

CARL: I was elated. My wife had come to Alameda to meet me. I wasn't treated bad and never was in any immediate danger. Fortunately for me, I wasn't piloting one of those landing craft. The Coast Guard did a pretty good job of that.

INTERVIEWER: What was your rating when you were discharged?

CARL: Radioman Third Class.

INTERVIEWER: What was your most memorable experience during your time in the Coast Guard?

CARL: The first shock was that as a radioman I was never allowed to transmit. I had to listen to BAMS, British and American Merchant Ships. All they sent out on the airwaves were storm warnings and weather reports. That's all I did. I was never permitted to send a message. It would clutter up the airwaves, I guess. So if the officers needed someone to help they would call on me, because I was a nobody, a radioman who could not transmit. I helped chip the deck, take a boat over to pick up food from a Navy ship, just do things they needed done. I had no status.

INTERVIEWER: How did your time in the Coast Guard during World War II change your life?

CARL: It saved my life. If I had been drafted into the Army I probably would have been killed. It was also a maturing factor. I didn't even drink beer when I joined. I never had any outside experience and then being tossed into the Coast Guard during World War II was real growing up experience.

INTERVIEWER: Is there anything I didn't ask you about that you would like to share, or any thought you would like to leave to future generations of Coast Guardsmen?

CARL: I can't think of anything. I don't think I contributed that much to the war.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you for sharing your memories.

END OF INTERVIEW